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### Closest Without Going Over

Annie Dewitt

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*Photograph courtesy of the author*

## *Closest Without Going Over*

He's that same Rocket, that same big-hearted swindler. When I arrive, he's sitting on the back stoop of St. Luke's funeral home, the one downtown with the Christmas lights, chain-smoking cigarettes and getting drunk on communion wine from the rectory. He was an altar boy as a child. Before he came out. Or, the priest came out. Or, we all came out and realized that there was more to the world than this town. A mire of strip malls and tract houses built on old Indian burial grounds. Rocket had once described the town to me as the gaping mouth of the concrete jungle where his mother's womb ended.

"The best way to play a wake?" Rocket says as I sit down next to him. "Give it the game-show treatment. When they open the coffin, think *showcase*. Barker's Beauties." He motions toward the window of the middle-class funeral home. Inside, people in suits are milling around his father's body. Waiting to leave. Waiting to remember. Waiting to feel anything at all.

"The hardest part?" Rocket says. "Bidding on the body. How much do I bid on my old man's remains?"

"Same rules apply?" I ask.

"Same rules," he says. "Closest without going over."

Groups of his relatives—good Catholic people who, when they called me anything, had always called me "Rocket's girl"—huddle by on their way to the parking lot.

"Jesus, Gin," Rocket says. "Is it still you? Are you still Miss Goody-Goody? I didn't think any of the old team would make it."

"The truth is everyone's from this town," I say. "Or, one like it."

The night we met, Rocket was sitting in the backroom of a downtown bar with Dolly drinking Jack and Gingers. Dolly could map out the whole country on a cocktail napkin. She too worked in the theater.

"Where you from?" Dolly asked.

"Florida," I said.

"To Florida," she said, drawing the state and tucking it into Rocket's pocket before raising my Maker's and shooting it.

Later, Rocket took me home. There was an eviction notice on his door.

"Who's John Doe?" I said. "Who's anybody?" Rocket said. An out-of-work actor, he'd turned to choreography and set design. The walls of his room were plastered with postcards and pairs of women's shoes. The apartment recalled '90s gluttony, a period we were born into through no fault of our own. A pair of red kitten heels hung from a nail over his headboard.

The walls were lined with clear plastic boxes, action figures he'd been given as a child. "How did you know these would become valuable?" I asked.

"I've always had an eye," he said. Beyond the sound of the street coming in through his window, the figures are what I remember the most.

I told him I needed to scare some pain out. To bury some bodies that had crashed into mine recently.

"Right," he said and went to the bathroom to draw us some water.

Together we drank and staged drownings, choreographies that involved the names of my exes. Rocket filled the bath, holding me down until I burst forth from the surface. When it came time to kill off the last of them, I opened my eyes and looked up. It was morning. The birds were out. In the thin light, the tub was cracked and yellowed. The rim was mossy with hair from where he had shaved.

"I see you," he mouthed to me before I came up for breath. Beneath the surface, the world was softer, one long sustained hush where all I could feel was my heart beating and the vague contours of my body.

When I got home, I found an empty pack of menthols in my purse with a cocktail napkin stuffed into it. "I'd like to go to town on you," Rocket had written in shorthand next to the name of the bar.

Before the month was out, we made a place for ourselves in a duplex. The house was blue. The roof caved in places. Rats nested in the insulation. Dolly lived beside us. Friday nights everyone met at Dolly's and practiced lines on one another.

That summer I'd begun to have the feeling I was disappearing. I'd had this feeling once when I was in college. A professor had asked me to start off a workshop with comments on a young woman's story about Florida. The story ended with the woman's dog drowning. Her retriever descended paw-over-paw to the bottom of her in-ground pool. The dog's body was discovered by her husband the next morning. The story was always punctuated by lines like: "Summer scratched her head and the ships went out to bay." I had had enough stories about women named Summer in Florida and their dogs. I'd gone to school with them.

Another time, I was a child. It was a hot day in June before school let out. To go "Around the World" you stood next to a student's desk while

the teacher asked you a multiplication question. Whichever student answered first moved on. I had gone around the room once that afternoon already. I had memorized a lot of things that year—the nights my parents fought before therapy and the sound of my mother’s orgasms. Those were not things they asked you to recite in school.

That afternoon I went “Around the World” twice before the recess bell sounded.

My parents decided to enroll me in dance class. I was tall. I didn’t make for a bad dancer, put in the classes with the older girls who had their periods. There was a competition at the community college in the next town over. Assabet Valley Vocational. All the girls were always saying, “Are you going to Assabet?” The teacher was a middle-aged woman whose husband owned the pizza parlor in town. In the end she sent all the other girls. “Adolescent acne,” she’d said sheepishly, looking at my back. She’d thought perhaps I’d lose points on our jazz number.

That same summer Mother enrolled me in a class with a cosmetologist. “Putting Your Best Foot Forward.” The class took place in the upper school’s basement with its bad green tile. It was a chance to meet local business owners, to be struck by their spirit of entrepreneurialism.

“You’ll learn your colors,” Mother had said.

Early on, the cosmetologist comes around to each of our desks, drapes silk swatches over our shoulders, cast-off negligees of various colors. I was a Fall. All the other girls were a Spring or a Summer.

Years later in the fancy college I attended, one of the lifelong private-school girls asks me, “Have you been in pictures?” We’re standing in the cafeteria, which smells slightly of chlorine and reminds me of the public pool at the Y. “Who, me?” I say. “What I know I learned in a class called ‘Putting Your Best Foot Forward.’” She too could probably take the class for a hundred dollars.

I have this memory again as I sit next to Rocket at the wake. We look out down the road across a series of lawns. Small patches of yard marked off by fences and the occasional row of miniaturized trees. Halfway down the block from the funeral home, a child is swinging on a swing set in front of a chain-link fence. We watch him swing as we smoke. Each time he descends he tilts his head back, lets the breeze rush up over his head.

“Jesus,” I say. “That kid’s really flying.”

“When I was little, my dad used to say that if I pumped real hard, I’d fly to Venus,” Rocket says.

We sit like this for several minutes. The air is still and heavy. The heat from the pavement rises up through the soles of my shoes.

"At least we've still got the blood," Rocket jokes, raising his flask. "Who needs the body."

I smile. Rocket laughs.

He puts his hand on my leg, fiddles with my skirt.

"Look at you," he says, letting the air up under the edge of the fabric.

A pack of pigeons scatters around the dumpster.

"Would you forgive me if I didn't go in there?" he says, poking his knuckles into my palm.

"It's your showcase," I say.

"I've always called things like I see them," he says.

That summer together in the duplex, Rocket had enrolled in acting classes at the Y. I picked him up each night after class in the Honda we shared with Dolly. If I was early, I sat on the hood of the car and smoked, watched the East River go by and waited for class to let out. People at the Y said we looked related. Rocket had grown out his hair that summer, thick curls that framed his face like mine.

I didn't mind this public twinning. What mattered to me was the private space between people, the length of bedsheet between you and the person with whom you shared your luck at the end of the day. That, I thought, was where you could measure how chosen you'd been by love or lust or something that lifted you up outside of yourself and made you forget life as others lived it.

A pamphlet arrived in the mail near the end of August, sitting on the kitchen table, mixed in with the bills and the circulars. Rocket's acting class was running a three-week retreat. The Y was bringing in some bigwigs from L.A. The retreat's claim to fame was a hibernation period. The process of sleeping recalled a time before the ego was implanted in the body. The laissez-faire attitude prompted dreams of skinny-dipping in the lake and hikes in the woods. The body, it said, had its own predetermined vocal pattern that had been established since childhood. The key was to listen for each organ's inner voice and unleash it until your entire body was Making the Noise Your Body Wants to Make.

Rocket was down on himself, months since his last acting job. The word "callback" we now equated with insurance creditors, people we pictured in ill-fitting polyester from the Midwest.

"Go," I said. Dolly gave us the next month's rent three weeks early. I wrote the check to the Y.

The day I picked him up, Rocket was haggling with the man behind the counter.

"All I heard was static," he said.

"That's the point," the man said. "You *felt* something."

"But what did I feel?" asked Rocket.

"You felt the tail of the cat. The horns of the goat. I don't know," said the man. "You felt *free*."

As we made our way out of the building toward the stiff New Jersey sunlight, I noticed that Rocket walked with a limp.

"Achilles heel," he said. "All part of the *awakening*."

Dolly's Honda was slow to start. Behind us, the gray vinyl siding of the gymnasium glinted in the sun. The structure resembled a portable storage unit, the sort of building where people rent plots of space in which to store the personal belongings they don't want to give up but would like to forget. I stared at it in the rearview. I'd had my jaw broken once in a similar establishment. The orthodontist in his office in that working-class city. He'd inserted a plastic plate in my mouth that you turned with a key that he said would widen my smile. "Too much teeth," he said, flashing my father the Polaroids.

"What's with you?" I said to Rocket in the parking lot. "I've never heard you this quiet."

"I met someone," he eventually said.

"It's Bob," the man on the line said when he called our house that evening. "From the clinic."

"Bob who?" I answered.

I could hear this Bob breathing on the other end of the line. Shallow breaths like he thought I might yell or embarrass him. My hand went numb. I had to shake the receiver a few times. It seemed his voice had gotten lost down the line. "Let me tell you something, Bob," I said. And then I said nothing. I'm not sure how much time passed like this. The two of us breathing at each other.

"Look," Bob said, "it's not your fault. It's just human nature."

"You're a man," I said into the receiver.

"We aren't getting any younger," he said and hung up the phone.

We pull up to Rocket's father's house now somewhere in the suburbs of the demolished Indian burial ground. Rocket's aunt waits for us in the drive. Old bird. Gray hair. Small body, just like him. She hands Rocket a copy of the keys and directs us to the bar down the road. In case we get thirsty later.

The aunt pulls me toward her. Her breath, stale. Her bangs smell of spray. The plastic brooch on her collar catches on my jacket. "Good to



see you again, hun,” she says. I watch her car idle down the driveway and out into the road.

Rocket stumbles over the cracks in the walkway where the weeds have come up. He sits on the step of his father’s porch and finishes his cigarette. I take the yellow rocker behind him. He leans against my leg while I rock.

“What’s your best memory of the years we spent together?” he says.

“Spain,” I say.

“We’d pushed the two twin beds together,” he says.

“We made so much noise on that bed that the guys in the next room sang the national anthem,” I laugh.

We laugh. Rocket throws back his head, takes a swig from the communion wine. “Jet fuel, Gin,” he says, “burns out when you’re only halfway across the continent.” He hurls the flask into his father’s yard. It disappears by the pine trees.

Inside, the house is dark. Rocket fumbles under the sink. I turn on the light over the stove.

We sit with our backs against the refrigerator. Rocket files shot glasses in a row across the floor, spaces them out according to the pattern of the yellowing linoleum.

We start in the bedroom where there is a television. I watch reruns of *The Price Is Right* while Rocket rifles through his father’s things, shuffles through drawers for anything he might keep. The television is one of the old boxes with the rotary dials that you have to crank. On screen, Bob Barker is announcing the showcases. Rocket slips one of his father’s gray sweaters off the hanger and pulls it over his head.

“My mother always said it didn’t matter how much dough my old man was rolling in,” he says. “He only kept what he needed.”

“What did he need?” I say.

“All the world beyond this town,” he says.

Rocket reaches into his jeans and pulls out a cigarette tin. “Little Grammys,” he says, palming a small white pill. He crushes the pill on the dresser, draws out two thin lines with his father’s prayer bill, and bumps the powder.

“It feels just like winning,” he says.

“How many?” I ask.

“Just enough,” he says, “to quiet the audience. At the Grammys, everything’s just script.”

During the commercials, we climb the stairs to the attic, wedge boxes of clothing between bags of Christmas ornaments. Rocket dangles a red



bulb in the light. "Maybe it's like taking a holiday," he says. He pulls a list out of his pocket. I scan the numbers next to the names of foreign hotels. "My old man's last leg. Found it in his box at the bank."

"I don't know," I say. "Short notice. Tall order."

"Come with me," he says. "Remember our contract."

Our first night in London he feeds me day-old samosas off the catalogue of some exhibition. When he is asleep, I open the window of the hotel room and lie down on the carpet. Every now and again, I go over to the bed and put my greasy mouth over his. He's wearing the mink from the back of his parents' closet. I straddle him with my legs as he sleeps. Try and feel that same sense of my own heart rushing out of my chest.

"What did it feel like?" I'd asked him that morning when he'd first come back from the Y.

"Four days," he said. "They had us crawling on the floor. Every time the guy clapped, you fell to your chest and surrendered, built yourself up from the tailbone, a vestigial organ where the *authentic* voice begins."

I think of this as I straddle him. I get down on the floor, my chin so close to the ground that I can smell the chemicals in the carpet, others people's dust. I'm waiting for the sound of something inside me. I extend in every direction until the rug burns my chest.

When he wakes, Rocket puts the sign out for the maids. The room is littered with bedclothes and blankets, bottles of liquor and bags of takeout. Two tickets to China sit on the desk.

"Where to?" I ask him in the mirror of the bathroom. He places his chin on my shoulder and presses his chest into my back.

"I go where you go," he says.

I hear the lock on the bathroom door as he takes my hand.

We begin by counting our money. Pretty soon, one of us will have to leave the bathroom to scour for food.

On the counter, next to the sink, there are various stacks of currency, small piles of coins and wads of bills parceled out according to origin.

"This stack is from my father and I's trip to Paris," Rocket says, fingering a thick roll of francs.

He tells the story: the day they rode the glass elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower. An American tourist mistook his father for a French businessman, asked his father for directions to a hotel outside the city. "Outside the city," the guy repeated, motioning toward the horizon visible through the glass. "Parlez-vous anglais?" the man said, pointing to the words in his phrase book. Rocket and his father had feigned

misunderstanding, wanting for a moment to transcend the images of themselves that had always separated them.

"What's next, Gin?" says Rocket when he finishes the story. I rifle through the stack of tickets in our itinerary.

"Today," I say, "we're off to Madrid."

"Have we been there?" he asks.

"Once," I say.

"So you've seen it?" he says.

"We've seen it," I say.

Outside the window, London is gray and descriptionless. I run my hand over the glass.

"What did we see?" he says. "Play me 'Madrid'?"

"A park," I say, "and a plaza. Some museums, and a palace."

He laughs, leans back in the tub.

"The thing about hotels?" he says. "Sometimes you have to know when to keep the world out and lock the good guys in."

That night, it's nothing but us and the Grammys. The bathtub is roomy. If we lie lengthwise, it makes a decent-sized bed.

We pop and plan. It's all about who can come closest, without going over.

"How about Zimbabwe?" Rocket asks, calling out destinations. Each time he calls out a city, he downs one of his father's morphines and tosses a set of tickets into the trash.

"Affirmative," I say.

"Then on to Nepal?" I ask.

We tell stories, each in their order. What we don't know we fill in: there is the beer garden in Frankfurt, the stretch of sky over the Leidseplein in Amsterdam. ("Take a picture," Rocket says, reaching for my hand.)

In Belize, we cut through mangroves. We take in a sex show in Turin.

By the time we hit the Great Wall, I'm on the countertop, chirping. Rocket lobs cigarettes at the toilet and warbles in the bath.

"You're tonguing," he says.

When the maids knock each morning at checkout, we slide them some money. They slip us packets of chocolate and wafers. On the good days, they bring envelopes of almonds and coffee.

We wake in fits and starts as the days pass.

"Entrainment," I joke as we ride the Chunnel from London to Paris.

He rolls onto his back. I put my head on his chest and take him into my hand.

"Our next stop is Venus," he says.

I remember the day of his father's funeral. The home with its floral carpet. The receiving room where the priest had given his speech. His sister reads a section from the Bible about love. My parents in the receiving line. Mother in a bright yellow shift. She has a saying about funerals: "Bring all of yourself. Or, you'll be forgotten." I sit next to them for a moment to pay my respects. I look down at my father's worn black tennis shoes. Why they're here, I can't figure. One goes to these things in towns like this.

A woman comes up to us on her way out the door. She asks where I've "landed." "Oh her!" Mother says.

In moments of ecstasy or panic, I often have the feeling of exiting the world, hovering outside my surroundings. I read an article once on the "hows and whys of invisibility." "It is possible," the author said, "to become invisible, but you must be patient, methodical, and willing to eat almost anything." She recounted a spell by a British polymath that instructed you to begin by acquiring the severed head of a man who has committed suicide. You bury the head, together with seven black beans, on a Wednesday morning before sunrise, and water the ground with fine brandy. On the eighth day, the beans sprout. You must persuade a little girl to pick and shell them. Pop one into your mouth, you turn invisible.

Once, I'd asked a doctor about disappearance. "Well," the doctor said, "it's the distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary. The crisis of dissociation is a crisis over what constitutes the limits of intelligibility."

The doctor told me a quote by a writer he'd always admired. "Realness," he said, "is not a category in which one competes; it is a standard used to judge any given performance." I'd mentioned the quote once to Rocket; he'd scribbled it down in his book.

I look over at Rocket now in the tub across from me. He looks like someone I know from the television, a glowing hologram radiating his own distinct light. "Come on down," the Barker calls out. I watch from my seat as Rocket bounds through the aisle toward the stage.

On stage, there is a woman displaying a showcase. "Life," it says. The showcase looks like nothing I'd imagined. What I see is threads of longing. A little girl planting some beans. A man holding his own head. David Bowie is playing in the background: *No one ever saw you. Moving through the dark. Leaving slips of paper somewhere in the park. Hidden from your friends. Stealing all they knew. Lovers thrown in airless rooms then vile rewards for you.*

As Rocket disappears into the showcase, I feel my voice rising. This is the sound I was waiting to make.